

THE GOD OF THE BIBLE AGAINST SLAVERY.

BY REV. CHARLES BEECHER.

It seems very strange that any one should think that the Bible sanctions slavery. Yet the defenders of the system appeal to the Bible with boldness, as if its authority were on their side.

The Charleston Union Presbytery, South Carolina, declare, that "the holding of slaves, so far from being a SIN in the sight of God, is nowhere condemned in his holy word."

The Charleston Baptist Association "does not consider that the Holy Scriptures have made the fact of slavery a *question of morals at all.*"

The Georgia Methodist Annual Conference resolved that "slavery, as it exists in the United States, is not a moral evil."

The Protestant Episcopal Society for the Advancement of Christianity declare in a tract, that "without a *new revelation* from heaven, no man is authorized to pronounce slavery wrong."

Rev. James Smylie, of Mississippi, (endorsed by two Presbyteries,) says, "The twenty-fifth chapter of Leviticus clearly and unequivocally establishes the fact, that slavery was sanctioned by God himself, and that buying, selling, holding and bequeathing slaves, as property, are regulations which are established by himself."

Rev. Thomas S. Witherspoon says, "I draw my warrant from the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, to hold the slave in bondage."

Dr. Fuller says, "I find my Bible condemning the *abuses* of slavery, but PERMITTING THE SYSTEM ITSELF."

Statements like these could be brought from sources of high

standing, to any required amount. Now, the very boldness of this claim may stagger some minds. How could men dare appeal so earnestly to the Bible, if it was really against them? But as history shows that the worst despotisms of the Old World have been in the habit of putting forth just such claims, so it may be in the case of slavery. It may be only the instinctive effort of an evil system to stave off judgment, by clothing itself with sacredness as a Bible institution, and representing all opposition to it as infidelity. And when we reflect on the cruelty of the system, this appears quite probable; nor, if we look at the arguments used to back this claim, is the probability at all diminished.

A fair Bible argument ought to show that slavery, as defined by the slave law, is agreeable to the character of God as revealed in the Bible. If this be really friendly to the system, then, and not otherwise, is slavery upheld by the Bible. Now, this is not the usual method of the defenders of slavery. Instead of it, they usually appeal to the curse on Canaan, the practice of Abraham, the legislation of Moses, and the silence of Christ and the apostles — an argument in every point unsound, nay, even absurd, when stripped of rhetorical ornament, and stated in the plain dialect of common sense. God cursed Canaan, who settled in Asia; therefore Ham, whom God did not curse, and who lived in Africa, must be enslaved. Abraham had *armed* servants, free to leave his service at will; therefore we may hold slaves *unarmed*, and without the least power to change masters. Moses' laws destroyed slavery in Palestine; therefore God sanctions our laws which make slavery eternal. The apostles declared masters and slaves brethren, and forbade all recourse to Roman civil law; therefore they sanction that law and its cruel offspring among us.

Let it not be said that this is a caricature. If you tear off the fleece from a wolf in sheep's clothing, you do not caricature him; you show him as he is. So it is not a caricature to tear off rhetorical fleece from a sophism, and show it to be absurd.

Leaving, however, this point for further consideration by and by, let us now test the system of slavery by the only fair Bible argument; an argument not from disputed theological points, on which Christians may honestly disagree, but from the revealed attributes of the true God, about which there can scarcely be much difference of opinion.

What is the Bible view of God? How does he stand towards slavery as defined in the American slave code?

1. The Scriptures represent God as interested in the *temporal* concerns of men. Indeed, he is the Author of all really good social organization, and the only cause adequate to preserve it from corruption. He was the Founder and manifest Executive of the Hebrew commonwealth; and their system was the wisest, for the ends in view, that ever existed. All nations are held accountable to him for their laws and institutions; and whatever system is intrinsically unthrifty, disorderly, and disorganizing, must be displeasing to him.

But slavery degrades labor, discourages education, science, art; enfeebles commerce, blights agriculture, and continually works society towards barbarism. No traveller from a free to a slave state can fail to be struck with the evidence of this. The wisest southern statesmen have confessed slavery an incubus; and the fate of the Roman empire, where the experiment was tried on a magnificent scale, demonstrates the fact beyond denial.

Says Alison, "The steady growth, unequalled extent, and long duration of the Roman empire prove the wisdom of their political system; but it fell a prey at length to the dreadful evil of domestic slavery."

Says Dr. Hague, "What caused that weakness of the empire which gave the barbarians a chance to overturn it? The answer is, The slave system within the empire corroded the core of its strength, and rendered it a mere shell, unable to resist the pressure of its enemies."

Such a system, then, cannot be well pleasing to God.

2. God is revealed in the Bible as the Author of the family state, and the jealous defender of its purity. The family is the oldest, simplest, strongest, and most sacred institution of God on earth. All true systems have guarded it; all false systems have struck at its very life. Two of the ten commandments aim directly to establish the family, —

"THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTERY."

"HONOR THY FATHER AND THY MOTHER."

Any system of laws, then, which nullifies the family, and legalizes concubinage, is in direct and flagrant opposition to the law of God, and must excite his deepest displeasure.

But what is slave law on this head?

"A slave cannot even contract matrimony." (Stroud's Sketch of Slave Laws, p. 61.) "Slaves are not entitled to the conditions of matrimony." (Taylor's Roman Civil Law, p. 429.) Slaves may indeed go through the usual forms, and be joined by the minister at the altar; but the laws allow no reality, no binding force, to the transaction. The law has nothing to shield any female slave from the passions of her owner; and husband and wife, parent and child, may be legally sold asunder forever, at any moment. Thus the family is completely annihilated *by law*, and the result is universal licentiousness.

"We southern ladies," said the sister of President Madison, "are complimented with the name of wives; but we *are* only mistresses of seraglios."

Nor is this destruction of the family an "abuse" of the system. It is an essential element of its *legal* being. Therefore the system of slavery must be exceedingly odious before God.

3. The Bible reveals the JUSTICE of God. He is the Creator and Father of all, and all are his offspring. All bear his image. He loves all impartially. All have equal rights before him. He is the common Judge of all, before whom all complaints must come for final decision. He is always represented as judging the cause of the poor and needy, and pleading for the oppressed. If we should extract from the Old Testament alone, to say nothing of the New, all that God says against social injustice, the accumulation of testimony would be overwhelming.

But what does slavery say of itself in its laws?

"Slaves," says the South Carolina statute, "shall be deemed, held, taken, reputed, and adjudged in law, to be chattels personal in the hands of their owners and possessors, and their executors, administrators, and assigns, to all intents, constructions, and purposes whatsoever."

That this is the radical doctrine of slave law throughout the South, the following statement of Mr. Goodell shows:—

"Where other usages or statutes in any of the states fail, recourse is generally had to the Roman civil law." That law was as follows:—

"Slaves were held *pro nullis, pro mortuis, pro quadrupedibus*. They had no head in the state; no name, title, or register; *they were not capable of being injured,*" &c.

This is the root notion of slave law. A slave is counted "*as a cipher, a corpse, a quadruped.*" He is not a citizen. He cannot be injured or wronged, because he is so stripped of rights that he has no rights to be violated. But why? What has he done? Does he deserve this? Is there any ground for it in natural law? None. Says Blackstone, "It is repugnant to reason and the principles of natural law that such a state should exist any where." Book I. chap. xiv. p. 423.

The slave has simply been born of a slave mother, and is thus stripped of his rights because his mother was before him; she, because her mother was; and so onward until we arrive at the original act of man-stealing in Africa, which our laws condemn as piracy, and Moses' law punishes with death. Therefore the ablest judges confess in open court that this is intrinsically unjust. "Merely in the abstract," says Judge Ruffin, of North Carolina, "it may well be asked, which power of the master accords with right?"

Here, again, we are not dealing with "abuses" of the system, but with the system itself, as it is in its own laws and courts; and we ask, Must not the Bible, revealing a God of infinite justice, reject such a system, and expel it from the world?

4. God is infinitely benevolent. Awful as God appeared on Sinai, the law that he revealed there was love, and in it he disclosed the deepest law of his own being; so that "he that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God, for God is love." The gospel is a still higher unfolding of the same feeling, for "God so loved the world that he gave his beloved Son to die." Hence no one can deny that any system which is radically selfish must be hateful to God. But slavery confesses this of itself. If we wish to hear slavery speak, we must go into southern courts, and hear the SLAVE LAW utter itself through the lips of its ablest judges.

Speaking of the legal relation of master and slave, Judge Ruffin says, "This has been assimilated at the bar to the other domestic relations; and arguments drawn from the well-established principles which confer and restrain the authority of the parent over the child, the tutor over the pupil, the master over the apprentice, have been pressed on us.

"The court does not recognize their application; there is no likeness between the cases; they are in opposition to each other, and there is an impassable gulf between them. The difference is that

which exists between freedom and slavery, and a greater cannot be imagined. In the one, the end in view is the happiness of the youth born to equal rights with that governor on whom the duty devolves of training the young to usefulness in a station which he is afterwards to assume among freemen. * * * With slavery it is far otherwise. *The end is the profit of the master*, his security, and the public safety; the subject, one doomed, in his own person and his posterity, to live without knowledge, and without the capacity to make any thing his own, and to toil that another may reap the fruits. * * * *The power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect.* I most freely confess my sense of the harshness of this proposition. I feel it as deeply as any man can; and as a principle of moral right, every person in his retirement must repudiate it; but in the actual condition of things, *it must be so; THERE IS NO REMEDY."*

This may stand as a full and fair confession from the mouth of the slave system of its incurable selfishness. Parents may be selfish, but the relation itself of parent and child is not intrinsically selfish, but benevolent. But while, on the other hand, the master may be humane and benevolent, the *legal relation* existing between him and his slave is intrinsically and unchangeably selfish. Therefore the mere fact that the Bible reveals a God of infinite benevolence, is ample condemnation of such a system.

5. The character ascribed to God in the Bible is eminently un-despotic; the opposite of the usual character of earthly monarchs. Abraham conversed familiarly with God as a man with his friend. Moses found him, even on Sinai, long-suffering, slow to anger, and of great mercy. The Psalms and prophecies all breathe the same spirit; while Christ, in whom dwelt the fulness of the Godhead bodily, said, "Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart."

Alluding to the tyranny of earthly lords and rulers, Jesus said, "So shall it not be among you;" and afterwards actually stooped to wash his disciples' feet, saying, "If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, ye ought also to wash one another's feet."

Now, is this the fundamental characteristic of the slave law? Meekness, lowliness, self-sacrifice for inferiors? Not so thought Judge Ruffin, when he said, "The power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect." It is power, not love, on which such dominion stands, — brute force, not

ideas. Indeed, Judge Ruffin asks in open court, "What moral considerations shall be addressed to such a being to convince him, what it is impossible but that the most stupid must feel and know can never be true, that he is to labor thus upon a principle of natural duty, or for the sake of his own personal happiness? * * * *Such obedience is the consequence only of uncontrolled authority over the body.*"

And this is despotism—a government not of ideas and motives, but of bodily violence. Hence Jefferson declared "the whole commerce between master and slave to be a perpetual exercise of the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and of the most degrading submission on the other."

Therefore he adds, that the children of slaveholders "nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities."

As much, then, as the character of God, as shown in Christ, is opposite to the character of a Nero or a Caligula, so much is the Bible opposed to the system of American slavery.

6. Finally, the Bible reveals God as above all other things interested in the moral elevation and renovation of men, their deliverance from darkness and sin, and their preparation for heaven. God only is Lord of the conscience. All men have from him equal religious rights. The Bible reveals to all the solemn sanctions of eternity, and summons all to the same judgment seat. To all it brings the message of salvation through a crucified Redeemer. Any system, then, which darkens the mind, and tends to prevent repentance, and faith, and holy living, must in the highest degree incur the wrath of God.

All Protestants admit this principle as applied to Romanism: consistency requires them to admit it as applied to slavery. For slaves are far more dependent on their masters, who are not even professedly Christian teachers, than Catholics on their priests, who are. It is against the law to distribute Bibles and good books to slaves. It is against the law to teach them to read. The law gives to every master full power to deprive his slave of all religious instruction, *if he choose*; or to determine the nature and extent of that instruction. And the result is, that the slaves are generally ignorant and demoralized. The Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, in 1833, said, "In this Christian republic, there are over two millions of human beings in the condition of heathen, and in some

respects in a worse condition." * * * "They may justly be considered *the heathen* of this Christian country." Similar testimony is abundant from other religious bodies at the South.

Now, if the slaves have souls; if they are in danger of eternal destruction; if Christ died for them; how great the guilt of that system which thus imperils their salvation!—a system which, not content with stripping them of all their rights here, tends directly to defeat their last hope of happiness hereafter!

With an unbeliever in future punishment this argument might have less weight. But with the majority of denominations of Christians in this country, it is an argument of inconceivable power. If God be justly indignant with pagan delusions, with papal priestcraft, and with other systems which tend to destroy the soul, how much fiercer the indignation he must feel towards this, whose malignant tendencies in this respect are unparalleled upon earth! And how can the Bible, which reveals him, fail to make war on such a system?

Now, in the face of such a Bible argument as this, an argument susceptible of unlimited expansion, an argument any single point in which ought to be conclusive, what do the defenders of the system allege?

Shall we take up again, and examine in the light of this development, their fourfold plea?

1. Noah said, "Cursed be Canaan." We answer, that curse was executed on Canaan, all whose descendants are, in Gen. x., expressly located in Palestine. What has it to do, then, with Ham, who was not cursed, and whose descendants were located in Africa? As well call the yellow fever in New Orleans a fulfilment of Moses' curses on the Jews.

2. Abraham had slaves. We answer, Abraham had several wives; does the Bible therefore sanction polygamy? But the fact is, Abraham's slaves were *not* slaves as Southern law defines slavery. They had arms; they could leave his service at will; there was no state and national law to interfere. Indeed, instead of being in Abraham's power, he was in theirs.

3. Moses legalized slavery. "Of them" (the heathen) "shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids, and ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you, to inherit them as a possession; they shall be your bondmen forever."—*Lev. xxv. 46.*

But, as Dr. Hague judiciously remarks, "this must be understood

in consistency with *the law of the jubilee*, laid down in a preceding part of the same chapter, (ver. 9, 10,) "Ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto **ALL THE INHABITANTS THEREOF.**" Hence the meaning of the statute is not the entail of perpetual slavery on any class, but simply the confining the Jews in the purchase of slaves, always and forever, to the children of the heathen." — *Christianity and Statesmanship*, pp. 382, 383.

A full view of all the Mosaic statutes on this subject shows conclusively that the *property* principle of our laws was in no wise sanctioned. Let us take a bird's eye view. Moses found slavery in existence. He legislated not to perpetuate, but to destroy the practice. Hence, while in other nations it continued, in Israel it disappeared, so that in Christ's time, while the Roman empire was full of slaves, in Judea there were none. Moses' laws were the opposite of ours in this: ours favor the master, his favored the slave; ours disfranchise the slave, his made him a Jewish citizen. Kidnapping was punished with death. Every Hebrew slave and every circumcised foreign slave went free the seventh year. Every fiftieth year all went free, whether proselytes or not.

No permission was ever given to *sell* a slave, or bequeath them by will; nor is there any evidence in the record that such a thing was ever done. The law protected the person of the slave. The loss of an eye or a tooth set him free. **IF THE SLAVE RAN AWAY, ALL WERE STRICTLY FORBIDDEN TO HELP THE MASTER CATCH HIM.** This alone destroys entirely the chattel principle. More than one third of the slave's time was at his own disposal by law. Finally, the slave was required to be circumcised, and incorporated into the state as a citizen, with the right of intermarriage, and of equal religious privileges, and there was no prejudice of color or caste feeling to keep him down.

The contrast between such a system of legislation as this, and the American slave code, is as wide as between the things of God and the things of Cæsar. It is a contrast so entire, that if to-day the Jewish law could be substituted for our slave code, it would instantly operate as an effectual abolition of the entire system of American slavery.

4. Christ and the apostles did not condemn slavery. We answer, Christ spent his life in Palestine, where slavery had been

abolished. He, probably, never came in contact with Roman slavery. The argument is then narrowed to the apostles. The question now is, what stand the apostles took *in their epistles to converts from paganism*; for of their actual preachings to unconverted pagans we have few vestiges remaining. Paul's sermon on Mars' Hill, in which he declared that "God had made of one blood all nations that dwell on the earth," is about the only specimen of an apostolic sermon to pagans.

Did, then, the apostles sanction the Roman civil code, in their letters to the churches? This is manifestly the vital point of the whole argument. For it is the Roman civil code, and not the Jewish, from which our slave code has descended.

We reply, they not only did not sanction it, but they unequivocally, and with the whole weight of their authority, condemned it. In his letter to the Corinthian converts, Paul asks, "Dare any one of you, having a matter against another, go to LAW before the unjust, and not before the saints?"

And again, —

"I speak to your shame. Is it so that there is not a wise man among you, no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren? But brother GOETH TO LAW with brother, and that before *the unbelievers*." That is, in the courts of the Roman civil law.

"Now, therefore, there is utterly a fault among you because ye GO TO LAW one with another," &c.

Christians, then, were utterly forbidden to go into Roman courts, and to appeal to Roman law; and then the whole system of slavery was in an instant annihilated, both the slavery of slaves, and the slavery of sons and of wives. For the Roman civil law gave the father absolute power of life and death over his wife and his son, as much as over his slave. And if the apostles had by silence sanctioned that law in one respect, they would have equally sanctioned it in all. But they did not. They were not silent. Says Dr. Hague, "Far from availing themselves of any power granted by the civil law to retain their brethren in bondage, *their religion forbade them to refer to that law any question respecting their duties to each other.*"

Hence slavery was immediately abolished in the primitive churches. For whenever a question arose between a convert and his former slave, he could no longer resort to the *civil tribunals*; he

must go to the brotherhood, and the case must be issued by them. But they had sworn allegiance to Christ. His golden rule was for them "THE ROYAL LAW," "THE LAW OF CHRIST." Hence, when the apostles commanded masters to love their servants as brethren, and to render to them things *just* and *equal*, we see a deep significance in those words. "Justice" and "equality" were terms not predicable under Roman law of slaves. What "justice" to a *cipher*, a *corpse*? what equality to a *quadruped*? Roman law must have been utterly ignored before such words could be used. Hence all the passages alluding to masters and slaves receive a new meaning, far different from that the defenders of slavery are wont to give. Does the apostle speak of slaves "who are *under the yoke*," "suffering wrongfully"? It is plain they are converted slaves of unconverted masters, who have *not* ignored Roman law. Does he caution converted slaves "*not to despise*" their believing masters? It is plain emancipation has taken place, with its natural reaction from servility to unrestraint. Does an escaped slave, now a convert, wish to return to his former master, now also converted, the apostle entreats Philemon to receive him "not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved." Such expressions the apostle could never have used, if he had not utterly repealed and ignored the Roman law, as having any thing to do with the conduct of Christians.

Such, then, is the value of the so-called Bible argument in behalf of American slavery. Noah's curse cannot touch Ham in Africa; Abraham's servants are insulted by the idea of chattelhood; Moses' law is the antipode of the Roman; and the Roman, with its courts, expressly prohibited by apostolic authority.

At the same time, on every page of the Bible a glorious God of infinite order, purity, justice, benevolence, meekness, and grace, stands revealed against a system of disorder, lust, injustice, selfishness, despotism, and irreligion. Does, then, the Bible uphold Slavery? Nay, verily, it must ever be to that system a consuming fire. Either the system must be consumed, or the fire quenched. **EITHER SLAVERY OR THE BIBLE MUST BE PUT DOWN.**

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